

Abe to stay on cent, save U.S. a mint

By Roger Boye

Abe Lincoln's brooding profile will remain on the one-cent coin for years, judging from the comments of a government executive.

Mint Director Donna Pope said that most United States citizens are satisfied with the portraits on circulating coins, despite a few complaints that the designs are getting stale. Also, any major revision would eat up tax dollars.

"Each time a change is made, people withdraw coins of the old design," she said. "The mint would have to work twice as hard with many more people [on the government payroll] to make up for those [withdrawn] coins."

Pope spoke to hobbyists late last month during the American Numismatic Association convention in Detroit. She described her first three years in the job as a "busy and often turbulent" period with several revamped programs and products.

One such change, the conversion to copper-plated zinc coins in 1982, is saving Uncle Sam more than \$20 million a year in metal costs alone, she said. Another project, the Olympic coin program, has raised \$44.7 million so far for the Los Angeles games and the training of athletes.

Some people have criticized the Treasury Department for slow Olympic coin sales. As of June 30, the mint had unloaded some 3.2 million pieces, far below the 52-million production limit set by federal law.

Still, Pope praised collectors for their "loyal support." She said that legislators had guessed when they set the 52-million-coin limit; they chose a number "we all knew was a little bit unrealistic."

Meanwhile, computer problems have created "one big mess" for government workers in processing orders for certain mint products, especially medals, Pope said.

Pope encouraged collectors who have not received merchandise from the mint after a reasonable time to write to her, and "I will thump on my staff." [Her address is United States Mint, Department of the Treasury, Washington, D.C. 20220.]

Another problem: The five-year gold medallion, introduced in 1980, has not become an American alternative to the Krugerrand, as officials had hoped, in part because of the five-year life of the program and because medallions are not coins with legal-tender status, she said.

Also, by year's end the mint might begin to sell leftover Susan B. Anthony dollars dated 1979 and 1980 because some collectors have complained that they cannot get dollar coins from their local banks.

"I feel kind of silly telling people I have \$350 million in our vaults, but we can't sell them," she said.